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ABSTRACT

Designed for high school students interested in careers in special education and related services, this guide outlines the role of a secondary school special education teacher. It addresses the nature of the work, the education required for the position, the personal qualities people should have who choose to be secondary special educators, job outlook and advancement for special education teaching, and how to prepare for a career in special education teaching. Special education teachers at the secondary level are described as instructing students with special needs by using different teaching methods than general education teachers use. In addition to preparing lesson plans, instructing, and evaluating their students, they are trained to develop personal goals and objectives with each student and to help them prepare for the transition from middle school to high school and for the transition from high school to college, job training, or work. While licensure requirements vary by state, all states require special education teachers to have a bachelor's degree and to have completed an approved teacher training program with supervised practice teaching. A profile of a secondary special education teacher is provided to illustrate the challenges and benefits of the job. (CR)

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CAREERS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION AND RELATED SERVICES

# Secondary Special Education Teacher

*An honor roll student in the 7th grade suffered a serious head injury in an automobile accident, and after missing two months of school is now ready to return. An eighth grader who has a learning disability reads at the level of a fourth grader. A high school junior with Down syndrome wants to apply for a summer job. A teenager in middle school, with a history of explosive behavior, was suspended for physically abusing a classmate on a school bus. He has received professional counseling and is returning to school. These four students have unique learning needs that are based on their physical, mental, and/or psychological disabilities. All are eligible to attend classes taught by a secondary special education teacher.*

Special education teachers at the secondary level instruct students with special needs using different teaching methods than general education teachers use. In addition to preparing lesson plans, instructing, and evaluating their students, they are trained to set personal goals and objectives with each student and to help them prepare for the transition from middle (or junior high) school to high school and for the transition from high school to college, job training, or work.

Federal law requires that students who receive special education services be classified by their primary disability. The categories include mental retardation, speech or language impairment, serious emotional disturbance, deaf or hearing impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment, deaf-blindness, orthopedic impairment, specific learning disabilities, and multiple disabilities. Over half of the students in special education have specific learning disabilities.

## Nature of Work

Secondary special education includes both the middle (or junior high) school and senior high school levels. Most secondary special education teachers teach in a resource setting where they meet with their students for one or two periods each day to work on their students' special needs. They frequently collaborate with regular education teachers about modifying the instruction for their students in regular education classrooms. Less frequently, special education teachers have self-contained classes where they teach their students for most of the school day.

Regardless of the setting, special education teachers help students with what they are having difficulty learning. Students with disabilities often learn and perform at different rates than students in a general studies program. A student with cerebral palsy, for example, might have difficulty with handwriting because of muscle damage to the hands. He or she probably cannot write the names of all 50 state capital cities on a map during a 30-minute quiz in social studies. The social studies teacher will consult with the secondary special education teacher, asking for recommendations on how to test this student's knowledge of state capitals. Perhaps the student can complete the exam verbally in the presence of a teacher. Maybe the student is proficient on a computer keyboard

and can type the answers. Together with the student, the two teachers will decide the best method or accommodation for this particular student.

Today's secondary special education teachers collaborate extensively with general education classroom teachers, health professionals, school administrators, and parents. This teamwork helps the special educator design or adapt curriculum for each student. In addition, students as well as parents are often very involved in making special education decisions affecting the adolescent. In fact, no child can receive special education services without written permission and legal documentation from parents or guardians. Special education teachers are required by federal law to help develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each special education student, which is signed by the student's parents.

The IEP can include academic, vocational, behavioral, social and life skill goals. For a student who has a learning disability, an academic goal might be to master certain mathematical calculations. A social goal for a student with mild mental retardation might be to learn how to be more comfortable speaking to adults; a life skill goal might involve learning how to organize a grocery shopping list for a class picnic.

At the secondary level, the IEP must include a transition plan which outlines specific steps for the transition from school to employment or postsecondary education. Transition goals must be addressed in the IEP by the time a student is 16, or if appropriate, by age 14. To help with the transition, the special education teacher might develop a life skills curriculum that includes such areas as personal finance management, household management, and occupational planning. A class of 10 special education students, because of varying disabilities, might need to learn several different types of life skills. Secondary special education teachers often write their own curriculum after using research libraries and consulting technology specialists for interactive computer software, videotapes, and audiotapes. Others use commercially developed programs.

In one school, secondary students with mental impairments learned about job skills by participating in instruction at a work site in the community. By extending the instructional setting into the community, these students had "hands-on" experience with such skills as stocking and pricing items, doing clerical work, or grounds keeping. In another school, the students learned about food preparation in the morning, and then worked in restaurants in the afternoon.

## Education Required

About 700 colleges and universities offer undergraduate and graduate studies in special education. Every state requires special education teachers to have a bachelor's degree and to have completed an approved teacher training program with supervised practice teaching. Some states require a master's degree in special education. Most bachelor's degree programs include classes in educational psychology, child growth and development, assessment techniques for use with exceptional individuals, curriculum for exceptional children, and characteristics of persons with disabilities.

Licensure (sometimes called certification) requirements vary by state, and not all states automatically accept the transfer of a teaching license from another state. Some states grant one credential to teach special education kindergarten through Grade 12. Other states require a general education license first and then grant special education licensure for teachers who have additional training in special education.

## Personal Qualities

People who choose to be secondary special educators are patient, have very good communication skills, genuinely enjoy teaching teenagers, and accept the differences in their students. They are good team players, working cooperatively with school administrators, other teachers, health professionals, and parents. Secondary special education teachers are also resourceful and creative in locating and adapting curriculum for the broad skill levels represented in their classrooms. Depending on class size and other factors, many teachers in this profession are willing to work overtime, especially during the first year of employment.

# PRACTITIONER PROFILE

## James Herzog

### Secondary Special Education Teacher

### Loudon County, Virginia

James Herzog is a secondary special education teacher in Leesburg, Virginia. While studying for a bachelor's degree in social science from James Madison University, he taught mainstreamed government classes for high school seniors. "About 10 weeks into the semester, I realized that I wasn't reaching all of the students," he recalled. "About a dozen of the seniors were special education students. They were trying hard, but were earning D's or F's in my class. So I started doing some research to find out how I could help them improve their performance."

James, who had no previous experience in special education curriculum, collaborated with special education teachers and began to study special education teaching methods. Gradually, he applied specific methods to his instruction style. (One girl excelled in class when James showed her how to highlight important text material with a felt marking pen.) The students responded positively to his attention and most raised their government grade to an A or B. Encouraged by the mutual success of his students and his influence on them, he enrolled in graduate school and a year later was awarded a master's degree in special education K-12. His first job as a secondary special education teacher was in 1995-96.

Although James spends most of his time as a classroom teacher, he also coordinates large amounts of paperwork and legal documents associated with student placement and testing, prepares an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each of his students, and attends meetings with other classroom teachers to discuss student progress (or lack of it). He maintains regular contact with the parents of his students, sometimes talking with them on a weekly basis. His full-time teaching load consists of six periods a day, all in the same building. He teaches eight subjects—English, social studies, and reading at the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade levels. A colleague teaches his students science, civics, and math.

Daily Schedule: James arrives at school at 8:00 a.m. and uses a 45-minute planning period to meet with other teachers, monitor the hall, prepare lesson plans, and work with students. One recent morning, James met with a troubled student who had disrupted three separate classes that day. When students arrive in his classroom at 9:50, they divide into two groups. During one period, for example, four students are enrolled in 7th grade English. A few yards away sit five students studying 6th grade social studies. James alternates between the two groups. Nine is the largest total number of students he has during any single period. "I make decisions every day about how to teach my kids," said James. "When I teach literature, for example, I decide what stories will best fit their reading level and personal interests."

Challenges: "Dealing with behavior problems is challenging. Some students have poor social skills, are unmotivated to do their best work, or resist following instructions. Students with learning disabilities might be reading several years below their grade level. It's not easy to keep them motivated, because they feel like they can't catch up with their classmates. Learning what teaching method works best for each student is always a challenge to me."

Satisfaction: "I love my job. I believe I can identify with most of my students because I had some of the same feelings when I was in middle school. It's very satisfying to influence students who aren't sure they can be successful. By the time kids get to middle school, some of them have had so much failure in the classroom that they're afraid to try. I set them up to succeed. When students respect and trust a teacher, they stop failing and start making progress. The dropout rate for high school students in special education is discouraging. I feel good when I am able to motivate a kid to stay in middle school and look forward to graduating from high school."



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## Job Outlook and Advancement

Special education teaching is one of the fastest growing occupations in the nation. Since the 1977-78 school year when states were required to provide services to students with disabilities, the number of students served (infants through age 21) has increased from 3.75 million to almost 5 million. In 1993-94, almost half of the students served were ages 12-17. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that employment of special education teachers will increase more than 53 percent by the year 2005. Currently, more than 350,000 special education teachers are working in public and private schools. Yet in 1990, 47 states were unable to fill all their vacancies for special education teachers. The unemployment rate for special education teachers in the United States is among the lowest in the teaching profession.

Job prospects are often determined by locale and area of specialty. For example, there are usually more teaching positions available in rural and urban schools. In the 1992-93 school year, the greatest shortages were for teachers who work with children and youth with specific learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, and for teachers who teach children with varying disabilities.

Secondary special education teachers can advance professionally by becoming supervisors, administrators, and college instructors. Although the large majority of special education teachers are employed by school systems, some work in hospitals, residential facilities, or with homebound students.

## How to Prepare for a Career

Students considering a career in secondary special education should seriously consider volunteer work to help decide if this challenging but demanding career is suitable for them. Organizations such as the Association for Retarded Citizens, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, United Way, National Easter Seal Society, and Special Olympics sponsor events for teenagers who have disabilities. They welcome volunteers. Sometimes special education programs in schools use student volunteers as tutors, mentors, or "buddies." Colleges and universities with special education departments are also a good source for volunteer placement.

## Resource Information

**National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education**
The Council for Exceptional Children
1920 Association Drive
Reston, Virginia 20191-1589
1-800-641-7824
E-mail: ncpse@cec.sped.org
URL: http://www.cec.sped.org/ncpse.htm

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